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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000922

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SUBJECT: SONDHI'S LAST STAND II - THE ALLIANCE

REF: BANGKOK 00829

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RALPH L. BOYCE FOR REASON 1.4 (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. On February 11, 2006 the second major anti-Thaksin rally in as many weeks drew a crowd conservatively estimated by the media at over 50,000. Sondhi Limthongkul broadened his movement to oust the Prime Minister by bringing together students, academics, opposition Senators, and groups opposed to the US-Thai FTA under the newly formed People's Alliance for Democracy. Though the police endured some efforts early in the day by demonstrators to provoke a confrontation, the rally proceeded peacefully in the Royal Plaza. The next protest is planned for February 26 in Sanaam Luang, near the Grand Palace and a historic and popular site for large rallies. Thaksin's offer to hold a national referendum on amending the Constitution was rejected by academics and other Alliance members as a hollow delaying tactic. END SUMMARY.

ANTI-THAKSIN ALLIANCE INVADES ROYAL PLAZA

12. (U) The People's Alliance for Democracy flexed its young muscles on Saturday, defying municipal orders prohibiting demonstrations at the Royal Plaza. Protesters began organizing at the nearby UN Building early in the day. At about 14:00hrs, a group of about 500 protesters marched arm-in-arm to the Royal Plaza and confronted a line of police in riot gear. After a brief negotiation, the police relented and allowed the protesters to enter the plaza. By the end of the evening, the crowd had swelled to near the size of last week's rally. (NOTE: Media estimates of crowd size vary widely, with most sources vastly underestimating numbers. POLOFF who attended both rallies noted that the February 11 crowd appeared only slightly smaller at its high point than the one the previous week. On February 11, however, there were far fewer people coming and going during the afternoon, making the total number of participants in the event lower. End note.)

13. (U) At 16:00hrs Police Commissioner General Kowit Wattana entered the plaza apparently to inform the organizers that they could not use the sound system that was being set up. Gen. Kowit was quickly surrounded by protesters (and journalists) and decided to retreat and avoid further provocation. The General was hounded out of the plaza by the growing crowd who surrounded his waiting van and plastered it with anti-Thaksin bumper stickers and flyers. Under clear orders not to respond to the provocation, the police left the interior of the plaza. About a half an hour later, two police trucks entered the plaza with smiling female officers handing out plastic cups of ice-cold water. The rest of the evening went by without further incident.

ALLIANCE SEEKS BROAD APPEAL - SONDHI KEEPS CENTER STAGE

14. (U) The Alliance was formed to help alter the growing protest movement from a Sondhi vs Thaksin spectacle into a coalition of anti-Thaksin organizations demanding the Prime Minister's resignation. In the few days since its inception, the Alliance has attracted anti-FTA groups, academics, university students, and some Senators (like Senators Kriangsak Choonhavan and Chirmsak Pinthong). The participation of student groups is viewed as particularly significant since students were the key group in democracy demonstrations in the 1970's and 1990's, and they have been notably absent from Sondhi's previous rallies. Speakers representing these various groups warmed up the crowd in anticipation of perennial headliner, Sondhi, who took the stage at 20:00hrs. Hammering on the day's recurring themes - the sale of Shin Corp., Thaksin's alleged tax evasion, FTA, and corruption - Sondhi energized the crowd and shouts of "Thaksin GET OUT" reverberated through the plaza during his one-hour-plus speech.

15. (U) The next mass demonstration is scheduled for February 26 at Sanaam Luang - the large park near the Grand Palace. In the interim, organizers will go out of Bangkok in an effort to expand the movement to the countryside.

16. (C) Thaksin was uncharacteristically reserved after this week's rally. On his Saturday weekly radio program, the

Prime Minister followed up his flip-flop on the use of the Royal Plaza with a vague offer to call for a national referendum to amend the Constitution. The offer was immediately derided by academics and other Alliance members as a hollow exercise designed to buy time and defuse the mounting pressure on his administration.

COMMENT - THE END OF THE BEGINNING

17. (C) COMMENT: The birth of the People's Alliance for Democracy marks a turning point in the Sondhi-led movement to oust Thaksin. While Sondhi likely will continue to play a prominent role, the entry of student groups, the anti-FTA crowd and others will likely alter the character of the movement. Many of the substantive issues remain the same, but the tactics employed by the demonstrators - who now include students and activists - may become more confrontational. Beyond these groups, the rallies also seek to draw on Bangkok's middle class. While this weekend's demonstration did attract some protesters from other provinces, it seemed to be a majority Bangkok crowd. If organizers are able to maintain their alliance and draw additional support from the countryside in a sustained campaign of public demonstrations, heretofore reticent opposition Members of Parliament will be under increasing pressure to enter the debate. The police, who have shown great restraint so far, may face more provocation, however, as students and other potentially less docile groups join the anti-Thaksin coalition.

BOYCE